

Myths, prejudice and history

LEGEND is a lie that has attained the dignity of age. — HL Mencken
The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice. — Mark Twain

Remember Jalan Birch in Kuala Lumpur, near the Merdeka Stadium? It's been called Jalan Maharajalela for many years now, Birch becoming a victim of a programme of Malaysianisation of road names.

But Birch also became a victim of Malaysianisation of history — from hero, he became a villain, and his killer, yes, Maharajalela, became a hero in the flash of a road sign change.

Few things can so poignantly illustrate the change in historical perspective as a country changes.

JWW Birch was a British resident (adviser to the Sultan) in Perak in the 19th century. The British used a system of residents to control most Malayan states. A local called Dato Maharajalela assassinated Birch.

Although the reasons why he did this are obscure, Maharajalela is now hailed as a nationalist who opposed colonialism and died in the process — he and his accomplice were hanged.

Hence his elevation to hero status and Birch's relegation to villain, a representative of an occupying force.

I remember my early history textbooks post-independence put

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Maharajalela in bad light until years later when the historical perspective began to shift.

We studied in our history books that Sir Francis Light was the founder of Penang which is ridiculous from a Malayan/Malaysian perspective because Malaysians must have known the existence of Penang long before it was "founded" by Light. To this day, Wikipedia states that Light founded Penang. How confounding is that.

When the British "founded" places, it meant they then established a system of governance with rules of law. There is a court system and a police force. Prior to their "founding" there was no such legal system among the locals.

Then, there was Sir Stamford Raffles who similarly was said to have "founded" Singapore conveniently and erroneously erasing the arrival earlier to that place by a prince from Palembang, Sang Nila Utama, some 500 years earlier.

It seems like even Singaporeans believe their history started with Raffles. I was at a performance put up by Singaporean MBA students in 1991 which started off the history of the country from the time Raffles "founded" it in 1819. How unfortunate!

It was with great amusement that



I read many years ago of a stunt pulled by an American (Red) Indian. After arriving in Italy via a commercial flight, he promptly announced that he had founded Italy.

And what right did he have to make that outrageous claim? The same that Christopher Columbus, an Italian who sailed on behalf of the Spanish monarchs, had when he proudly claimed that he had discovered the Americas (at that time Columbus thought it was the East Indies) in 1492, a land already inhabited by millions of others.

Now, Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim has controversially raised lots of heckles and temperatures by saying that Malay warriors such as Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat were mere legends — myths invented by fertile minds for the amusement of others, much like the Greek gods.

He is, however, a renowned historian with no political ideology, racial or national axe to grind.

To his critics he has this to say: "If you don't agree with me, bring out

the sources to show I am wrong. You cannot simply say you don't agree. I am saying that these things were not true because no reliable sources confirmed they existed."

That is a clear indication as to how we should go about clarifying history.

History must be based on facts. It must seek to recreate — without any ideological, national, racial or any other bias — what happened to who, what, when, where, why and how, the journalistic five W's and one H. Otherwise it remains a myth and legend.

Just as in the case of Hang Tuah, one should seek to ascertain whether Maharajalela was indeed a hero by trying to establish, based on facts, his motives for killing Birch.

Otherwise it becomes a mere speculation and interpretation which is not history.

We are a relatively young country and yes, we would need to rewrite history from the perspective of Malaysia and Malaysians. No, Light had not founded Penang and Raffles, Singapore.

There may be many questions we can't answer but we must make an effort to find them. And we need a proper system of archiving so that future generations know things the way they were.

History in school must not be a tool for nation building or used for any other agenda but to paint a true picture, as far as that is possible given all our collective prejudices, of Malaysia and of the world.

It needs to have balance, fairness and most of all truth about everyone's contribution to nation building. It must not seek to aggrandise one race or religion at the expense of others.

It must have enough of a mix of subject matter to ensure Malaysians have sufficient appreciation of Malaysia and how it has come to be where it is as well as an unbiased understanding of the state of the world. Anything else and it would become poor propaganda instead.

The best way towards this is to have a curriculum drawn up by historians and true educationists and to put in place a rigorous means of verification if we need to change history or at least what we learn of it.

You can interpret history but you must not rewrite it without factual basis.

It is next to impossible to make it objective but we must give it a damn good shot nevertheless, if we are not to live in and perpetuate a lie.

Independent consultant and writer P Gunasegaram (t.p.guna@gmail.com) says we need an accurate history before we learn anything from it.